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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000781

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: BAGHDAD SECURITY PLAN: MORE VIEWS FROM THE STREET

REF: BAGHDAD 546

Classified By: DEPUTY POLCOUNS ROBERT GILCHRIST FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Baghdad local leaders and average citizens continue to tell post that security on the streets remains better than before implementation of the new Baghdad Security Plan (BSP). However, some report that confidence was shaken by a series of car bombs and the resurgence of some street violence. As with our previous informal polling (ref), Shi'a respondents are slightly more positive than Sunni contacts, with all noting a decrease in violent militia activity. Interestingly, contacts in Sunni areas are increasingly critical of Al Qaida presence, as Shi'a militia appear to have disappeared from their neighborhoods. Several contacts -- especially in South Baghdad -- wanted to see more U.S. troops, believing that their areas have been neglected by the BSP. Some of our interlocutors also reported that a small but noticeable number of their neighbors displaced by the violence are returning to their homes. End Summary.

Still Cautiously Optimistic...

¶2. (SBU) Following on to our previous informal polling on the BSP (ref), Post and PRT Baghdad asked a number of our local leader and "man on the street" type contacts how the new security plan appeared to working several weeks on. Nearly all of our contacts agreed that security is notably better than before the implementation of the BSP, although we received a greater number of complaints than two weeks before.

¶3. (C) Many of the positive responses provided modest examples of how everyday life seemed to be improving for Baghdad residents. A Sunni Arab neighborhood councilmember from the Saydia district told post February 28 that his council met for the first time in months, due to the improved security brought by the BSP -- "Before we were shut down due to insurgency and militia threats." A Shi'a government employee separately related that he was now able to safely visit his sister across town, whereas before he could not go for fear of harassment (or worse) when he transited two Sunni neighborhoods on the route. A Shi'a traffic police officer said has less fear in approaching checkpoints than he used to. Like many Iraqis, he confessed, he carried two identity cards indicating alternatively Shi'a and Sunni ethnicity for use in safely passing through illegal checkpoints set up by insurgents and militias.

¶4. (C) Baghdad Provincial Council Member and Shi'a Endowment spokesman Dr. Salah AbdulRazzaq told Emboffs February 26 that conditions in Khadamiya district where he

resides and other areas were "much better after the BSP." He stated matter-of-factly, "Our neighborhood is now very safe." Some contacts also noted that the presence of Joint Security Stations in each neighborhood comprised of ISF and US forces have allowed residents the ability to voice complaints in a manner that they were not able to previously.

15. (C) Rasheed District Council Security committee chairman Majed Juma'a, however, offered a more jaundiced view -- the BSP "was indeed working," but the JAM leaders and the Jaysh al Omar Brigade leaders that he interacted with had fled the country. "They're waiting three to six months for the BSP to be complete," he said, "and then they will return."

... But Bombings Shake Confidence

16. (C) Several contacts opined that recent high-profile acts of violence, including a series of car bombings, had contributed to renewed concern and anxiety in many neighborhoods. A Shi'a emergency room doctor from Sadr City asserted February 28 that "car bombs continued to demoralize people -- we'd hoped they would end with the decrease in militia violence, but we're not there yet." The same doctor, who sees many victims during the course of his work, reported that JAM members he knew in his neighborhood were now denying their militia affiliation. Previously, he said, "they would have been proud."

17. (C) At the same time, some Shi'a Baghdad residents saw indications of renewed militia activities. According to a Shi'a local council member from Rasheed district in South

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Baghdad, "in general, things are still better, but some clashes are starting up again in the night. There are many more checkpoints, but what is the use of checkpoints if bombs still get through?"

Some Want More U.S. Troops

18. (C) Several contacts asked for more U.S. troops, expressing continued skepticism about the capabilities and neutrality of ISF. One Sunni government worker stated "We thought we would see more Americans, but they only come when there is an incident." A farmer from the heavily Sunni suburb of Abu Ghrieb seconded these comments in a separate conversation, calling the security situation "better than before, but still mediocre." He expressed disappointment that the visible US presence had not increased more.

19. (C) Most residents told us in general the ISF, particularly the Iraqi Army (IA), have "behaved themselves". Nonetheless, we have received sporadic complaints from neighborhoods such as Sunni-dominant Adamiya and Khadra that the members of the IA steal items during their raids. One local hire living in upscale Karada neighborhood was told by her neighbor that she should hide her valuables in a safe spot for when the Iraqi Army came to check on her house. Some allegations against MoI's national police have also surfaced, particularly in al Amel neighborhood, where high profile alleged rape victim Sabreen al Janabi was detained. A Sunni economics professor living in al Amel claimed that MoI's National Police forces were conducting abusive raids against Sunni residents, although he provided no further details.

Sunnis Start to Point at Al Qaeda

110. (C) Whereas in previous conversations with Sunni

Baghdad residents we heard heavy criticism of JAM and other militias, we now increasingly hear them complain of the Al Qaeda presence in their neighborhoods. This may be a result of a lessening in militia violence coinciding with implementation of the new BSP. A Sunni resident from Abu Ghreib explained it best when he said "Before, we didn't complain too much about al Qaeda because they were fighting the militias that would have killed us. But now, we are fed up with their infiltration and violence, and are more willing to do what we can to stop them".

¶11. (C) Indeed, many Sunni representatives have been eager lately to share their thoughts on how to deal with the insurgency. For example, a well-established Sunni contact from the Mansour District Council requested that T-walls be placed to separate out the heavily Al Qaida/insurgent controlled neighborhoods "such as Andalus and Washash" from the rest of the Sunni dominant West Baghdad areas "so as not to poison the rest of our neighborhoods". Likewise, a Sunni resident of the Jihad section of West Baghdad told us that residents are tired of the violence that insurgents and al Qaida bring to their neighborhoods and wanted more checkpoints to stop the infiltration from "Al Hamadaniya" village.

SOME DISPLACED RESIDENTS RETURN HOME

¶12. (C) Reports of returns or shifts of Internally Displaced People (both Shia and Sunni) primarily to Shia-dominant areas are increasing. A prominent Shia Sheikh from the outlying mixed Baghdad suburb of Madain told PolOffs that both Shia and Sunni residents had begun to return to that area -- which was previously beset by militia and insurgent activity. A Shi'a neighborhood council member in East Baghdad's 9 Nissan district said that some Sunni Arab families had begun to return to the predominantly Shia area. Similar anecdotes such as these have surfaced in other areas, sometimes in Sunni areas such as Jihad, though primarily in Shia areas.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The responses from our local contacts show that, from the perspective of the street, the new BSP is still having an impact, though in the view of many perhaps not as much as the initial days of implementation. One of our local staff recently assessed to poloff that

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while in general many Baghdad residents are afraid to get their hopes too high, most are appreciative of the relative calm and normalcy that has come to their lives over the past month and a half -- "two months ago, we stayed locked inside our houses as long as we could, feeling tense every time we left our homes. Now, we are not so stressed, though there is still a level of violence that has not disappeared."
KHALILZAD